Florida Everglades receives $1.1 billion for restoration

The Miami Hurricane: University of Miami

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The Royal Palm Visitors Center in Everglades National Park is part of the $1.1 billion restoration project under Biden's Infrastructure Law Photo credit: Josh Halper

On Jan. 19, the Biden administration announced its plan to spend a record breaking $1.1 billion on the restoration of South Florida's most lionized wilderness: the Everglades.

Aptly referred to as the "River of Grass," the Everglades is the largest remaining subtropical wilderness in Florida and this investment to have it restored is the largest expenditure in Everglades history.

The funding for the biodiversity hotspot is funneled by the Army Corp of Engineers as a sector of Biden's new Infrastructure Law, intended to restore, preserve and protect South Florida's ecosystem.

"The Administration is making the largest single investment in the Everglades in U.S. history," the White House said in a statement. "The iconic American landscape provides drinking water supply for over 8 million Floridians, supports the state's $90 billion tourism economy, and is home to dozens of endangered or threatened species."

U.S. representative and South Florida Democrat Debbie Wasserman Schult denotes the iconic wetland as the "life blood of Florida" for its vital role in supplying drinking water to millions of Floridians, and housing endangered, rare, and exotic wildlife.

The plan for restoration includes projects centered around simulating a natural flow of clean water through the everglades.

Historically, the Everglades covered over 3 million acres from the Kissimmee River into Lake Okeechobee, through the Everglades and into the Florida Bay. But after decades of draining and using the land for agricultural and urban development, the Everglades ecosystem has been severely degraded as a result.

This degradation resulted in Congress authorizing the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan in 2000 with the goal of restoring, preserving and protecting the Everglades, with a specific focus on restoring water quality and flow. However, each project required congressional approval, with delayed many actions from taking place.

"I think the Everglades is absolutely critical to considering the overall water management of South Florida, so I understand why it's been called the life blood," said Emma Miller, a junior majoring in ecosystem science and policy and Spanish.

"It is a big player in purifying our groundwater and aquifers and all of the water that flows south from Lake Okeechobee to impact the Everglades," Miller continued.

Miller explains the importance of the Everglades beyond its South Florida reach and into central Florida.

"It ultimately has to play a role with the urban and agricultural development as well, so you can't consider any of things without considering the health of the everglades because that impacts how we're able to live and farm here," Miller said.

While it's clear that restoring the Everglades can be of great benefit, Miller is happy that the government is giving more attention to this national park.

"I'm glad that there is attention for it and a general attention for conservation, but I think the overall health and persistence of the everglades will be impacted by the global response to climate change," Miller said.

Sophomore Lia Mussie, majoring in ecosystem science and policy and political science says the Everglades is an integral source for humans and the environment.

"There are immense natural and human benefits of the everglades, " said Mussie. "The Everglades are important for water quality improvement, flood protection, shoreline erosion control, recreation and social opportunities, and should be appreciated for the natural products at our disposal at no cost."

However, not everyone is convinced that the $1.1 billion will be put to good use. Ken Russell, a Florida democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate believes that the most "vital action" for true restoration is sending clean water from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

In 2017, the state of Florida approved the EAA Reservoir, which was invented to take water from Lake Okeechobee, clean it of algae-causing nutrients and send it to the Everglades. According to Russell, not one dollar of the $1.1 billion is going to the EAA Reservoir.

"The environmental benefits of restoring the southerly flow would also have tremendous economic benefits," Russell said in Orlando Sentinel. "The fish kills and deterioration of coastal water quality fed by the discharges hurts tourism, fishing, and home values. So why was the EAA Reservoir not funded in this historic spend?"

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